JAPS PRAY AND HAVING SATISFIED GODS, REVEL IN TEMPLE ENVIRONS

Strange Mixture of Worship and Pleasure Among People Who Visit Kwannon.

BINZURU, HEALER OF ALL ILLS

Description of Japanese "Midway"—Scenes Within Temple.

By Eleanor Franklin.

TOKIO, July 7.—Japan doesn't even play like anybody else. In her pleasurings, in her ordinary summer holiday foolishness, she is, as in all things else, quite unique, quite isolate, apart from all other peoples; selfish. Resentment avails us nothing, however, for she is entirely indifferent to our approval in all things save the one in which she is able to command it. She is a Gargantuan baby defying precedent, and though we cannot eat with her, we cannot drink with her, we cannot even play with her, we must acknowledge her one of us, and not the least of us, in the great comity of nations, because she is superior in that thing which has counted for superiority always in all the history of all the world.

The closer one gets to Japan, the more one knows about her, sees of her, the less one is able to understand that thing which she has done, is doing in Manchuria. The other day down at Asakusa, the Japanese Coney Island, the conglomerate pleasure place about which I am going to write, there was a juggler in an outlandish comic-opera costume sitting in the shadow of a sacred Buddhist lantern delighting a gaping crowd with skillful tricks of necromancy. He took from his big kimono sleeve a bit of brown paper, common, unattractive brown paper, and proceeded, after carefully showing it to the audience, to roll it up into a little round ball about the size of a robin's egg. He showed it to us and smiled foolishly, shrugging his shoulders comically, then he rolled it around a time or two again, opened his hands and, presto! it was gone. Of course, he reached up and produced it from the back of his neck with a child-like smile which made the audience laught as if it had not seen the same trick done a thousand times before. But this was not all. Again he began to slowly roll it around and then he shut it up in one hand and blew upon it knowingly. Pretty soon he began to pull out from between his fingers yards upon yards of crepe paper cut in fine strips. He blew upon his hand again, gave it a funny little flip and a perfect cloud of confetti flew out over the heads of the people. He made believe to shut his hand up very tight and then he began to dig into it with his other fingers, and in a moment he pulled out a whole flowering peony bush of crepe paper which spread itself out into perfect gorgeousness. Nobody could have expected more than that, but that was not all. He began to push one finger vigorously into this wonderful closed fist and pretty soon a long stick began to appear which grew and grew until it became a huge umbrella which he opened with a click in answer to the enthusiastic plaudits of the crowd.

Wonders Out of Nothing.

"Well!" I thought, "If that doesn't exactly illustrate the genius of Japan I never saw anything that did." There it was. Marvels out of nothing. Japan is unfolding marvels of herself every day before an admiring world and to ever increasing applause, but to us, her visitors, her most intimate observers, she is as the bit of brown paper, revealing to our unassisted mental vision absolutely no evidence of the wonderful powers with which she is endowed. This is the thought which goes with me always as I wander around along her crudities and oddities trying to bridge the gulf which is fixed between us and her, fixed as surely as broad oceans are fixed between our shores. Even in the midst of the country's most recently imported modernities this thought is sure to intrude itself upon one, but in such a place as Asakusa it is the uppermost idea.

TEMPLE OF THE GODDESS OF MERCY AT ASAKUSA.

It is difficult to determine at first whether Asakusa is a place of prayer or a place of play, but one very soon concludes that as far as one's self is concerned it is a place of neither. It is a temple. Everything in Japan which rises an inch above the dead level of single stories, grey tiled monotony, is either a temple or a new building in "foreign style," so called, somebody says, because it a style foreign to anything else anybody ever saw. Asakusa is an ancient temple wherein she of a Thousand Hands, Kwannon, Goddess of Mercy, sits enshrined in gaudy splendor. So ancient indeed is it that its beginnings are "lost in obscurity" as the guide books say about so many things. It is situated away down on the Sumida River, which flows sluggishly through the heart of Tokio and out into Yedo Bay, and near the spot where it stands a fisherman, they say, drew up in his net, sometime about the year 600, a remarkable little image of the Goddess of Mercy, which possessed miraculous powers. It was about one and a half inches in height and was supposed to have been fashioned by god hands, so perfect was it in every detail, but knowing the wonderful skill displayed by some of the least of these people in the art of good carving I can imagine nothing more godlike than a lazy fisherman digging daintily away at a small bit of wood through long summer days and finally dropping his finished image overboard with a prayer to the deity it was made to represent for much luck in his fishing. It would be a beautiful addition to somebody's art-curio collection anyway, but this is a fate that is not likely to be in store for it, since it is enshrined within the holy of holies of this great temple of Asakusa and is never looked upon by other than priestly eyes. The temple is enormous and there is a popular joke about the disproportion of its size to the size of the image it was built to shelter.

But there is much at Asakusa beside the diminutive goddess. Kwannon is a very much beloved deity, and to her all the unhappy and unfortunate go in prayer, and she bids them be light of heart because the time is not far off when the axe which she holds aloft in one of her many hands shall sever the thread which binds them to earth life and they may then go to the River of the Three Roads where perchance they may be able to choose that one which leads upward to Nirvana, the divine absorption into blissful Nothingness, and this is doubtless why around her sacred edifices, all over the country, pleasure and piety interminglе themselves so freely; why it is so difficult to discover indeed where one leaves off and the other begins.

A Japanese "Midway."

The approach to the temple at Asakusa is a sort of "Midway" where one may buy at little gaudy booths any kind of toy or brilliantly colored sweetmeat or fantastic gewgaw ever manufactured in Japan. And in this "Midway" the tricksters, the fortune tellers and the owners of trained animals pitch their little tents to tempt the unbroken line of worshippers or onlookers, who, from morning until late at night, every day of the world, clank-clonk their thousand wooden shoes over the flag pavement toward the temple. But it is not like anything that anybody ever saw in any other place. I use the word "Midway" because it has come to have a peculiar meaning which more nearly describes this place than any other that I know. It is, or may be, even a Midway Plaisance to the Japanese, but this it can never be to the foreigner who hurries along, silently pursued by a crowd of staring little Orientals to whom he is the most curious thing to be seen in all the place.

I remember, one day at the World's Fair, in Chicago, following down the Midway, in company with two or three other girls of my age, a poor little Japanese maid who, in her native costume and queer little wooden shoes, was the strangest creature imaginable to us. We didn't even try to be respectful. We didn't keep at a little distance and endeavor to veil our curiosity by a pretense of interest in something else when the girl looked around. We simply stared at her, that's all, and made remarks which she probably imagined were anything but friendly. Well, I've often thought of that over here in Japan, and the memory of her has helped me to control my resentment against the gaping crowds that have so many times made life a misery to me. If she lives anywhere on the beaten tracks in Japan, as she doubtless does, she has had opportunity to take revenge upon me, and I venture she has done it, too, telling her less-traveled and world-wise neighbors at the same time about how rude the "green-eyed barbarians" are at home in their great cities and how they follow and laugh at helpless little foreigners.

It is a disgression, I know, but I just happen to think of the experience of little O Yuki San, the Geisha girl, who became the wife of young Mr. Morgan, of New York. He took her home and introduced her to the J. Pierpont Morgan strata of American society where politeness and consideration for the feelings of others is supposed to have reached its highest development. Everybody remembers how she was received. She very sensibly wore her native costume with little white tabi, or ankle socks, and straw sandals, and she instantly became Exhibit A in New York drawing rooms. The young gentlewomen of the Smart Set treated her very much as if she were an oddly dressed doll brought in for their amusement, to be looked over and picked to pieces at their pleasure, and O Yuki San, they say, bore it most patiently. Society did not have the excuse, moreover, of knowing that she was "only a Geisha girl" and consequently used to being stared at and talked about. They had been told, I believe, that she was a Japanese Countess, or something of that sort, and was, therefore, entitled to their consideration. This has absolutely nothing to do with Asakusa, but it is good for Americans in Japan to remember such little incidents when they feel like doing violence to a Japanese crowd that will not permit them to walk along the streets in peace, for we are just as curious creatures to them as they are to us.

The Great Temple.

At Asakusa one is glad enough to hurry through the "Midway" and get into the shelter of the great temple, where one may at least take refuge up against a pillar and become the observer of one's observers. Within the temple yard there are many strangenesses. Flocks of sacred pigeons fight with common barn-yard chickens over the half cooked beans one buys for them from the wizened little old women who sit under the huge votive lanterns watching their stores and knitting, perhaps, or gossiping. A fortune teller in priestly garb intones a "Namu Amida Butsu" (Glory to the Eternal Buddha) as he waits under his big yellow paper umbrella for some believing one to come along with a few rin to barter for a glimpse into his future state. A seller of pink sun-dried dough cries his wares in strident tones beside a purveyor of yellow literature, which shrieks aloud for itself in such colors as never came from any printing press but Japanese.

Under the temple steps is the inevitable old woman with evil eyes and blackened teeth, sitting beside a cage of wild sparrows, all fluttering piteously against their prison bars. She sits and grins and rubs her hands, and when some kind soul is moved to purchase the freedom of one or more of them she bows very low and chuckles, then she probably sends her boy off to watch the flight of the little sufferers and to catch them again when they stop to rest their tired and stiffened wings. One mounts the long, broad temple steps in the midst of a clattering throng, and in astonishment one turns to look upon the scene spread out below. The great two-fold gateway through which we have come is painted a brilliant, flaring red, and the intricate art by which the timbers are joined under the deep eaves is emphasized by touches of bright blue and white paint which lights up the interstices and makes the whole structure look like a huge puzzle in bright colored building blocks.

The author of "A Japanese Nightingale," should have copied the interior of the place for the temple scene in which her poor little singing girl is made an unwilling vestal virgin, but they say the author of "A Japanese Nightingale" never saw Japan, so one cannot wonder that her temple was like nothing that ever grew in this country of temples. The Asakusa shrine would make an ideal scene in a Japanese drama if it were cleaned up a bit and a few of the sacred dominick hens chased out of it.

To describe it is quite impossible. The altar, all gold leaf and gewgaws, is behind a huge wire net, put up to protect it from the chickens, likely, and outside this net all is motley madness. Great lanterns, as much as fifteen feet long and eight feet in diameter, are suspended in either end of the high ceiled room and all around them are smaller ones each bearing its message to the Japanese mind in huge black ideographs splashed upon its yellow surface. Gobin shaped drums sit here and there with little cotton wrapped mallets lying near, which the priests use at intervals to beat a steady ta-ta-ta-tump-tump-tump! accompaniment to their intoned sutras. The floor is not covered with mats, as most temple floors are, but is made of great rough cedar planks, which give forth a continual hollow echo of hundreds of clanking wooden shoes.

Healer of All Ills.

Over on one side sits dear old Binzuru, the healer of all ills. He would be a pitable old chap if he were not so much beloved, for he was once an honored Rakkan, or disciple, of the great Lord Buddha, and got himself turned out of the holy circle for remarking one spring morning upon the beauty of a passing woman. Since then his images are not allowed within the altar rails of the temples and are usually placed outside in the porch. It seems, however, that the Buddha had a fellow feeling in his heart for Bingura after all, for to compensate in a measure for all he had taken away from him he gave him the power to heal all suffering and pain, and that is why he is one of the favorite deities of Japan. His worshipers keep his naked wooden body all wrapped up in queer litle red cotton ruffles and his bare bald head covered with a funny little white cap which makes him look like a statue of a cook than anything else. At Asakusa the people stand in line before him awaiting their turn to rub that part of him wherein or whereon they are themselves afflicted, and if he were'nt such a solemn and such a useful person he would be very funny, for he is rubbed into the most fantastic deformity. Sufferers from rheumatics have rubbed his knees and elbows until they are all rubbed away; those afflicted with catarrh have quite destroyed his nose, while multiplied headaches have worn great hollows in his wooden temples. Indeed, Binzura is never a whole image, no matter where one may find him, and his popularity seems to always increase with his increasing dilapidation until sometimes he can hardly be recognized as a man at all. I lingered near him at Asakusa to watch the line of worshipers perform their odd little ceremonies, but a priest came along and stirred up some smouldering incense near where I stood and I had to escape from the stifling odor which arose in puffing sacred clouds to the grimy rafters.

One had to thread one's way carefully among the kneeling people before the screened altar and permit one's self to be carried along with the crowd out through the side entrance to the gardens where all was holiday merriment. Queer shows of all sorts line the muddy avenue down one side of the garden, and if one does'nt mind getting splashed to the knees it is possible to derive a modicum of amusement from the glaring sign boards and the "barkers" who sit at all the entrances lifting up their voices in mournful invitations to the people to come and view the wonders within. It is always muddy in all such places in Japan. The Japanese like it that way, evidently. If the sun begins to dry the mud up a bit a water boy, who seems intent on overworking himself, comes along with two pails on the ends of a stick, balanced on one shoulder and big bamboo dipper and proceeds to throw great puddles around under one's feet, and he calls it sprinkling. Of course, only those who wear leather shoes mind it, and as they are about one out of every nine hundred and ninety nine, they don't count. All the others, men, women, and children, wear wood gets, which stand up on little stilts about five inches off the ground, so what care they for a few inches of slush more or less?

Prayers First, Then Revel.

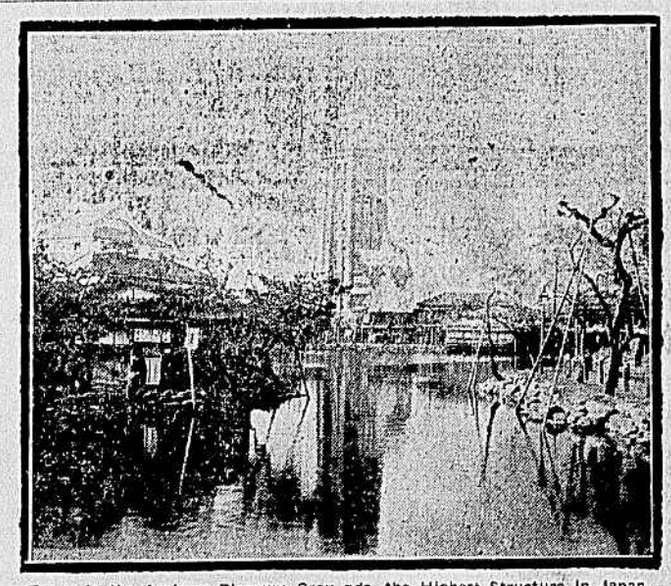
Asakusa is not respectable. Having prayed their prayers to Kwannon the people go out into her temple environs and revel in joys far from godly. There are many "tea houses" where tea is a mere pretense and where Kirin "biroo" on draught is the favorite beverage. "Biroo" as they call it, is, by the way, manufactured in Japan with almost as much success as has been achieved for it it Milwaukee as "the beer that made Osaka famous' is an advertisement," which is quite as well known down on this side of the earth as a similar one is up on the other.

There is one thing now at Asakusa which bears some resemblances to a place of amusement, and that is a panorama in 'foreign style" of the storming of Nanshan. The Japanese fleet off in the blue waters of Kinchow Bay on the east are sending lurid, wonderful shells through the air to meet those hurled by the Russial fleet from Talien Wan on the west, while on the hills between the two armies are locked in a struggle that is simply beautiful. Nothing phases the valiant Japanese. He says to the cringing Russian "Take that! and that! and there now!" and then he strikes an attitude on the highest point in the landscape just where the light from a bursting shell may illuminate his noble mien as he overlooks with sorrow the fearful havoc he has wrought. Barbed wire entanglements, big guns, shrieking shells, insurmountable obstacles, all the difficulties of war are mere incidents, background as it were against which this Japanese attitude may display itself before the admiring eyes of Japan. But the wonderful part of it is the fact that it is only for the eyes of Japan. To the world they turn an entirely different face and the world exclaims 'How modest!" There are absolutely no limits to Japanese genius, but I think the greatest thing it achieves is this concealment of itself. A mask is held up before the world and the world is told it is Japan, and only by accidental flashes of revelation do we recegnize the fact that is is'nt. We foreigners are permitted to live in the country, but we are shut out of Japan as completely as we ever were in the days before Commodore Perry came into Yedo Bay with his gun-boats. They play a little game of jiu-jitsu with us and win all their points by yielding, and we know they win, but we cannot help ourselves. We must admire. They are quite isolate, apart from all other people, selfish, but they are one of us and we can only hope that for our own peace of mind they may continue to conceal themselves.

A Put-Up Job.

The musical boarder awoke in the night to find a burglar in his room. The burglar was making for the window with a small black box under his arm. "Oh, Mr. Burglar!" cried the musical boarder; "please don't take my flute! I'll give you ten dollars I have hidden if you will only leave my flute!"

"No use, young man," answered the burglar. "The other boarders give me twice as much to steal it!"—Cleveland Leader.



Tower in the Asakusa Pleasure Grou nds, the Highest Structure in Japan.

South Carolina's Rum Mill.

With ex-Senator McLaurin firing hot shot into the dispensary at every opportunity and Senator Tillman unwilling to defend it as at present conducted, the South Carolina rum mill seems to be in rather bad plight.—Charlotte Observer.